

River water row a way out: About Kaveri and Krishna

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That the Governments of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka are behaving irresponsibly in the matter of the Kaveri river water dispute should be a self-evident statement. Arousing mass passions on water is particularly dangerous, since perceived injustice in the matter of such a basic life-requirement as water can make people self-righteously inhuman. And it is not unknown to these leaders that there are a large number of Tamil speaking people in Karnataka, including the city of Bangalore, and an equally large number of Kannada speaking people in Tamil Nadu, including the city of Chennai.

It is of course easy to blame both parties, and both must necessarily share the blame. But one cannot help feeling that the behaviour of Karnataka is reactive to the tone set by Jayalalitha's government in Tamil Nadu. After all, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka have had an equally acrimonious exchange of accusations on the sharing of the waters of the Krishna river, but that has not led to competitive rousing of mass passions. Not on the same scale, at any rate. The factor missing in the Krishna basin and present in the Kaveri basin is the politics of Jayalalitha.

There may not be much to choose between any two politicians of contemporary India, and S.M.Krishna is certainly not an angel. Yet one is constrained to remark that Jayalalitha has taken politics one step lower than her compeers in the Indian politics. Being corrupt and autocratic are common characteristics of Indian politicians, but Jayalalitha's political cynicism is unparalleled. There are few as utterly and absolutely unscrupulous in political manipulations as the self-styled *puratchitalaivi*. She belongs to the select category of politicians who can with equanimity watch people massacre each other if it means some slight political gain for them.

Yet, Tamil Nadu hardly has a case for getting righteously angry about Karnataka's unwillingness to let water flow down the Kaveri as required by the paddy fields of Tanjavur. Any more than Andhra Pradesh has in the matter of the Krishna river. In both these recurrent disputes, Karnataka appears as the villain of the piece: the selfish upstream farmer who will gobble up all the water and parch the fields downstream.

The truth, however, is not at all as plain as that, and on balance Karnataka is more the injured party than the villain, in both the Krishna and Kaveri disputes.

The fact is that inspite of all the alleged selfishness of Karnataka, it consumes less of Kaveri river water than Tamil Nadu, and less of Krishna river water than Andhra Pradesh. Yet, both these rivers get much of their inflows from the hills of Karnataka and not the dry lands of downstream Tami Nadu/Andhra Pradesh. I am not propounding the rule that the State which contributes most to a river's catchment is entitled to a greater share of that river's water. On the contrary, the opposite is more logical and equitable: the region which gets more rain and therefore contributes more to the river's catchment, should make do with the rain water for its needs and let less bountiful areas take the river water. This is a rational rule of equity, but nobody has a right to get self-righteous about it.

However, that is not the reason why Andhra Pradesh uses more of Krishna river water and Tamil Nadu more of Kaveri river water. If that were so, then for instance the Krishna river should be watering more of Telangana and Rayalaseema, which have among the lowest rainfall figures in the entire country, and not coastal Andhra Pradesh which has more than average rain fall. However, much of the Krishna river water used by Andhra Pradesh goes to the coastal districts of Krishna, Guntur and Prakasam.

The real reason is unequal historical advantage. Both the Krishna and Kaveri were dammed by the British in mid-nineteenth century, at a time when there was neither a legal nor a political compulsion to inquire about the needs and views of upstream people (whether of Karnataka, Telangana or Rayalaseema). Thus began the unequal distribution of the waters of the two rivers in favour of the coast and to the detriment of the needs of the interior. As the areas which received irrigation first developed faster and acquired further capacity to get more irrigation, the disparity had a natural tendency to widen. It would require strong political effort to turn the trend back. Karnataka has started doing just that, may be in part by 'rogue' methods. And over here in our State, the rational core of the seemingly 'emotional' demand for a separate State of Telangana is just another such political effort for a fair distribution of river waters. But to this day, in spite of the routine abuse Karnataka is subjected to, the asymmetry as between the States has not been set right. It will obviously take longer to set right the asymmetry as between the three regions of Andhra Pradesh.

What follows is that we should not be discussing river water distribution in the framework of language or linguistic States, but in the framework of comparative need. And this is a happy instance of what is equitable also being conducive to public peace and harmony. The less we link river water disputes with linguistic boundaries the less opportunity will politicians of Jayalalitha's ilk have to whip up unhealthy passions.